



What is the purpose of earwax?

Under normal circumstances, earwax helps prevent ear infections and keeps the ear from itching. Earwax is also considered a health problem when its normal function is altered or when the normal self-cleaning mechanism of the ear fails, causing an earwax impaction, or earwax Accumulation. Earwax is formed in the outer on-third of the ear canal. It is normally removed along with dust and dirt, from the external auditory canal with the movement of the jaw in combination with the motion of the ear cilia (tiny hairs). When the self-cleaning mechanism fails, earwax can build up in the deeper part of the ear canal leading to impaction or clogging. Ear wax can also trap bacteria in the ear, resulting in itchiness or pain, which are symptoms of an ear infection.

The following characteristics are normal for earwax. It can range in color from honey to dark brown. The consistency is usually sticky but may harden over time. As it dries it may become light gray and flaky or ash-like. Patients with a white, cheesy or mucus-looking material in the ear canal may be suffering from a chronic ear infection. Please see your health care provider immediately if you experience this.

Impacted earwax is a common cause of hearing loss or difficulty. The most common reasons for this impaction are:

- Use of cotton stick applicators (Q-Tips)
- Numerous ear-canal hairs
- Use of hearing aids
- Benign bony growths in the ear canal (usually seen in surfers/water athletes)
- History of ear infections or repeated ear wax impaction

Earwax impaction is treatable by a clinician and should not be attempted at home.

Ear cleaning and softening techniques

Production of earwax is normal.

If you have a lot of external buildup your ear canals should be cleaned with a damp washcloth wrapped around a finger, but do not insert anything into the canal.

The use of common objects to remove earwax, such as bobby pins and paper clips, can injure the lining of the ear canal and increase your risk of external ear infection.

Wax-softening products do not remove earwax but may soften it, allowing removal either through the ear's self-cleaning mechanism, use of a bulb syringe specifically made for the ear, or by a professional. To soften earwax debrox, glycerin, mineral oil, or olive oil may be prescribed as a preventative measure. Use three drops at night for several days before returning to see your health care provider.

When to see a clinician

If you experience a decrease in hearing, pain, ringing, itching, odor, discharge or cracking noises in your ear and/or you have a history of earwax plugs, see your health care provider for an evaluation.

For More Information:

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